

SPECIALISTERNE AUSTRALIA SUBMISSION TO SELECT COMMITTEE ON AUTISM

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SPECIALISTERNE



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Specialisterne Australia welcomes the Select Committee's inquiry into the services, support and life outcomes for autistic people in Australia. Our submission addresses services and support for autistic people who are seeking, or working to maintain, sustainable and meaningful employment.

In the interests of effectively informing the Committee's inquiry, we will limit our submission to terms of reference *e, f, g, i and k* and how they relate either directly or indirectly, to the *employment of autistic jobseekers and employees*.

Our submission will cover *what we believe* needs to change and how this can happen by identifying meaningful ways in which supports, systems and cultures can be developed and adapted to meet the needs of autistic people so that they can meaningfully contribute to the workplace and have active social and economic participation.

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“Overall, it [employment] has had a positive effect on my life. It has given me a group of people who I truly respect for all that they are and who truly respect me for all that I am, including my disability, in a non-judgemental way. I feel included by them. I feel useful and, with my role, I feel that I am making a difference to a group of the general population that gets overlooked and undervalued. This fulfils me and makes me proud to tell people what I do for the ATO especially when I tell relatives and friends. It makes me proud to be a contributor at home, financially. I feel now that I get to have a say on how money gets allocated and spent, and that is empowering. And all that makes me feel proud and alive!”

Autistic employee, placed through
Specialisterne Federal Government
Talent Program

UNEMPLOYMENT AND AUTISM

THE ISSUE

Autistic individuals are often excluded from, and are one of the most marginalised groups here in Australia when it comes to, gaining and maintaining employment. Our submission will discuss the extent to which existing open market recruitment and disability employment processes create inherent disadvantages for autistic jobseekers.

While as many as 1 in every 59 people is on the autism spectrum (CDC, 2018), only 40.8% of working age autistic Australians are employed, reflecting an unemployment rate of 31.6% (ABS, 2015). This is more than three times the rate for people with disability (10.0%) and almost six times the rate of people without disability (5.3%). Autistic individuals are often over-educated and underemployed for roles, with an over-representation in casual employment (Baldwin et al 2014). Autistic individuals are willing and able to work, with research showing that they can have higher than average abilities in areas such as pattern recognition, memory, analysis or mathematics, and are more productive and more efficient than their non-autistic colleagues (JP Morgan 2016). The high unemployment rate of autistic adults only highlights the significant barriers to employment.

"After completing a double Bachelor's degree it took three years before James was given an opportunity to secure his first paid job. Since leaving this role it took another 9 months before James became employed as a Tactical Intelligence Analyst with Services Australia, through Specialisterne's Federal Talent Hub Program. James estimates that since completing his degree he has applied for over 810 roles (Approx. 18 jobs per month) during his own job search and time with his DES provider."*

James* Autistic jobseeker

"...if you mention you are on the spectrum, don't even bother applying for the job when it comes to negotiating with recruiters and most hiring managers. I don't even try now; I've been burnt too many times..."

Kylie* Autistic jobseeker

Key responses from Specialisterne Australia's National Autistic Jobseeker and Employee Survey, May 2020

What is your highest level of educational attainment?

67% of respondents have a Diploma or higher, 45% have a Bachelor Degree or higher

How long have you been looking for a job?

54% of respondents have been looking for a job for 2+ years

Was the DES organisation helpful?

Only 29% of respondents felt they had received sufficient support from their DES organisation

TRADITIONAL RECRUITMENT AND EMPLOYMENT PRACTICES

Traditional recruitment and employment practices create barriers for autistic jobseekers. Our existing systems often form a reliance and unconscious bias towards “Cultural Fit” (desirable behaviours, characteristics and responses that recruiters and employers feel comfortable and familiar with). Many autistic people present with nonconventional presentation and interpersonal skills and can commonly be described as ‘neurodivergent’, a term used to describe individuals who have different and unique ways of thinking, processing and presenting information. Autistic people can often stumble at the first hurdle when it comes to pursuing a job and career in the open market as a result of vague and often generalist wording used in advertising and existing reliance on a dated assessment and skills identification process that most employers still use today via traditional hiring and interview screening processes.

“Traditional interview processes are a social process and they do not suit everyone (that also applies to neurotypical people as well).”

Westpac Manager

Some of the common barriers autistic people experience through the existing recruitment and employment processes include:

- Jargon, acronyms and over usage of vague and general terms in job ads and position descriptions;
- Lack of clarity and clear instruction about the application process;
- Preconceived judgement and bias by interviewers towards autistic people that present with non-conventional social and communication styles (in both phone screening and face-to-face interview environments);
- Interview processes built around a person’s ability to talk, sell themselves and build rapport quickly with strangers as opposed to a process that is used to draw out and practically assess a person’s aptitude, technical skills and abilities to undertake a specific role;
- Interview environments that fail to consider the sensory or processing challenges that many autistic people experience;
- Once employed, “one size fits all” induction programs and on the job training that does not take into account the varied and different learning and processing styles of autistic people;
- Lack of workplace knowledge, cultural awareness and capacity to understand and engage with autistic peers and colleagues. Fixed perceptions of autism as a negative or a deficit condition.

As a result of the barriers and limitations in the traditional open market recruitment and employment processes, many autistic jobseekers, who do not have an accompanying intellectual disability, find themselves reliant on unemployment and jobseeker supports through Disability Employment Services, Job Access and other state and territory initiatives. We will comment on existing system supports and how these may be improved further within the submission.

AUTISM AT WORK MOVEMENT

Established in 2004, the Specialisterne Foundation is an international not-for-profit social innovation enterprise. Specialisterne's primary mission is to enable and create greater employment opportunities for one million autistic people worldwide by working with governments and employers to realise the potential of autistic employees and enable those businesses to adopt a more positive attitude towards the talents and skills autistic individuals can bring to the workplace.

Based in Denmark, Founder Thorkil Sonne developed the 'Dandelion Methodology', an alternative approach to sourcing, assessing and recruiting autistic employees. Using a patient, practical approach, this methodology helps to identify and observe the talents autistic individuals can offer in the workplace that may not be immediately visible or observable through traditional recruitment and selection processes, that generally present as a barrier to employment for autistic people.

"Like weeds in a green lawn, people who are "different" – whether behaviourally or neurologically – don't always fit into standard job categories. But if you can arrange working conditions to align with the abilities of such individuals, they can add significant value."

Thorkil Sonne, Specialisterne Founder

Specialisterne USA commenced work in 2012 engaging with a variety of global NGOs to shift their perception to value the skills and technical abilities of autistic employees in organisations like Microsoft, IBM, Deloitte, SAP, JP Morgan Chase, HP (DXC) and Ernst and Young, pioneering and leading the inception of the Autism at Work movement.

Specialisterne's Australian chapter was established in 2015. Since 2015 we have worked with more than 100 national and global client businesses and agencies from across the financial, IT, government and consultancy sectors demonstrating how to successfully source, place and retain autistic and neurodiverse employees, as well as develop and enable the longer-term capacity of businesses to value and harness the talents of autistic employees within their businesses here in Australia.

Globally, Specialisterne has enabled and inspired over 10,000 careers for autistic jobseekers through our work with employer industries. In Australia we have enabled more than 365 direct career opportunities for autistic Australians with organisations such as IBM, PwC, Westpac, Australian Federal Government Agencies, WEIR Minerals, Xero, KPMG, NSW Public Service, the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services, the Victorian Department of Land Water and Planning and Sunpork. Since the commencement of our talent programs in 2015, Specialisterne's candidates have maintained an average 96% retention rate (which includes individuals who have retained employment but progressed into other roles within client businesses).

Specialisterne Foundation's early work has paved the way and inspired others to back the autism at work movement from both the social impact and business advantage perspectives. In recent years there has been a surge and growth in the number of commercial and for-purpose organisations here in Australia whose primary focus is to engage and or recruit autistic employees into businesses including Auticon, Employ for Ability, HP (DXC), Xceptional and Untapped.

"The Specialisterne program allowed me to demonstrate my skills in a practical environment and I believe it truly allowed my strengths to shine. I felt very comfortable working along with the other candidates as we completed challenges and at times pushed ourselves out of our comfort zones."

Autistic employee placed in ABS Canberra through a Specialisterne program

ALTERNATIVE RECRUITMENT AND CULTURAL APPROACHES

Our activities focus on demonstrating more practical and inclusive approaches to assessing and sourcing talents into businesses. We also work with businesses to build their skills and inclusive cultural practices through training and enablement. Through this work we develop their capacity to embed these practices across all areas of their organisations. We provide enablement training to executives, HR, Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) teams, team managers, supervisors and peers who work with autistic colleagues. Through this enablement work businesses can provide an ongoing inclusive workplace and culture where autistic employees can thrive in their work and career.



“Our team has all benefited from having someone with a different way of thinking!”

Westpac Manager

Specialisterne Australia works with jobseekers and employees who have a diagnosis of autism. Our work is informed by a deep understanding of the unique skills and capabilities of autistic people. Through our talent programs, we work directly with autistic jobseekers to identify their strengths, abilities and employable skills to ensure that individuals are matched to roles and industries where they can contribute and feel valued.

“My job at IBM has helped me move onto the next phase of my life. With a stable income, incredible opportunities to learn and grow and no more worry about tackling the neurotypical [traditional] employment system/approach, I've been able to look forward to work each day and cherish the opportunity. Feeling accepted for who I am, and my diagnosis has also been incredible, and for the first time in my life I feel like I can identify as autistic without feeling shameful or judged.”

Autistic employee, placed through a Specialisterne program

Our work with autistic individuals goes beyond recruitment sourcing and assessment programs. Once employed we help individuals to identify any revisions or adaptations they may need to help them in their work and provide mentoring through their transition and induction into their new role, workplace and team. Through initial employment, our team focuses on mentoring and coaching activities, for both the new employee, as well as coaching and mentoring for their line manager, supervisors, peers and other colleagues. During the first 6-12 months we also mentor autistic employees to identify their own networks of support to ensure they know how to access the professional, community and informal services that support a healthy work and personal life. Specialisterne tracks and monitors the career progress of all the jobseekers and employees who participate in our programs.

Our submission recommendations will address how the practical learnings and outcomes of the autism at work movement in Australia and overseas can be utilised, adapted and developed to improve services for autistic jobseekers and employees.

CURRENT DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT SYSTEMS AND SUPPORTS

ABOUT DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT SERVICES

A significant portion of autistic jobseekers fail to secure employment through the open market and are therefore directed to pursue assistance through Disability Employment Services (DES) and Job Access. These are Council of Australian Governments (COAG) funded services that provide assistance to people with disabilities, injury or health conditions who may need assistance to prepare for, find and keep a job. While placement rates for autistic jobseekers in the current DES system are encouraging, there has been a drop in placement activity and an increase in participant numbers who remain unplaced in the DES system over the last 12-months.* Through Specialisterne's varied interactions with autistic jobseekers we also acknowledge several anecdotal accounts and case narratives from individuals who have flagged their own challenging and negative experiences with their DES provider and specific cases where individuals' experiences have been so poor that they have fully removed themselves from the system.

While DES programs have previously utilised or partnered with 'specialist' agencies to offer services targeted at certain disability cohorts (e.g. AND, VISION Australia, Autism Organisations and Mind), utilising staff with specialist expertise and experience to provide support in relation to the particular needs of the cohort they represent. Today, most DES providers offer a more generalist service with the expectation that staff working in DES will be able to offer adequate and effective job search, coaching and employment support to jobseekers of all disability types.


Challenges of the DES system summarised:

- **Lack of specialist knowledge or qualifications of DES staff;**
- **Limited skills of DES staff to assess and work with autistic jobseekers to recognise and identify skills, strengths and employable attributes/traits;**
- **DES operating and performance model measured by the time it takes providers to place the jobseeker into employment from their commencement date with the respective agency. This practice drives many providers to simply place autistic and other jobseekers into 'any job' regardless of fit to meet performance measures and receive milestone related payments;**
- **Focus on low level/menial or foundational level roles as opposed to roles that fit the technical skills and attributes of individuals (i.e. easier to fill and place, than exploring skills, talents and seeking relevant roles in the open market);**
- **Over reliance and focus on CV/Resume writing for pursuing roles (which is not effective for autistic people);**
- **Mainstream employment and recruitment sector perception of DES and the types of candidates being presented within businesses is poor (disability and or deficit-based perception and lack of appropriate talent skill matching).**

Many individuals on the autism spectrum are diagnosed with secondary mental health and personal wellbeing conditions as a result of their isolation and long-term exclusion from the workforce.

*Labour Market Information Portal DES Data May 2019; May 2020
(<https://lmip.gov.au/default.aspx?LMIP/Downloads/DisabilityEmploymentServicesData/MonthlyData>)

**Name changed for privacy



*"Brad** applied for over 100 jobs. He had been with a DES for a number of years and had found the service inadequate in supporting him to find relevant and sustainable employment. During his time with his DES, he had not been referred to many jobs and when he was referred for employment opportunities the jobs tended to be very low skilled and sometimes menial. Brad was eager to gain employment and accepted these opportunities when they came by knowing that he was capable of more skilled work. He recalls a job he was referred to was for washing caravans at the minimum wage and it cost him more money to get to and do the job than he was being paid."*

Brad** Autistic jobseeker

NDIS FUNDED SUPPORTS

370,000 Australians receive funded support through the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). 113,000 have a primary diagnosis of autism which is equal to 30% of total scheme participants and is the highest prevalence disability across all disability categories. It should also be noted that these figures do not reflect the total number of autistic individuals in our population as they only include those individuals who have met eligibility requirements to receive funded support from the NDIS. 78,000 or 20% of total NDIS scheme participants are children with a diagnosis of autism aged 0-14 years.* These children will become working age Australians in the next few years and many will likely seek to pursue employment as an individual goal. It is therefore critical to ensure that both NDIS funded vocational and employment supports as well as non-funded community, mainstream and system-based responses, including employers, are prepared and equipped to support young autistic jobseekers to enter the workforce, progress and maintain meaningful employment.

A father's story....

"My son worked hard to achieve a Bachelor's degree in I.T. despite his poor academic record from a State High School unable and unwilling to deal with his ASD status. It took a tremendous effort on his behalf to go through a Cert 4 and a Diploma at TAFE where he excelled with the equivalent of straight As. So, at the end of his academic pursuits, he (and we, his parents) were convinced that he had set himself up for a decent career in his chosen field. However, we have found that any and all employment services are useless for him. He jumps through all of the hoops, has attended all of their tick-box meetings (where nothing ever gets done -it seems to be only for the benefit of the recruitment organisation - certainly not for his benefit as a job seeker) and so far has not even been offered an interview, or even a chance to get a job. His ASD is obviously too much for them despite his qualifications. He has studied constantly since attaining his degree 18 months ago and has since learned many extra I.T. skills via online courses. He is an optimistic and positive young man but has become disillusioned and is less than hopeful of ever getting a job."

Current NDIS funded supports such as the School Leavers Employment Support (SLES) program which aims to assist individuals to build their capacity to find, transition and maintain employment are only accessible to autistic individuals who are deemed by NDIS as having an "extreme" enough impairment to require funded supports. This generally excludes most individuals who are diagnosed at an ASD Level 1 and in some cases Level 2 (using DSM-V diagnostic criteria for Autism). Again, this can be extremely challenging for autistic people as quite often their challenges and impairments are related to their social, communicative and emotional interactions with people and their community. Therefore, their impairments or challenges are harder to articulate and quantify than others who may have an obvious physical, behavioural or intellectual impairment.

Like DES services, even for those individuals who do receive NDIS funding, the same challenges exist within SLES providers as most SLES programs are delivered through existing DES providers who lack specific skill and expertise to work with autistic students and jobseekers with the exception of a handful of autism specific providers such as Autism Association of WA and Aspect Australia who operate an autism specific SLES program in NSW.

"Sam** participated in Specialisterne's Talent Program for PwC in May 2018 and performed at a commendable level throughout the program. It was discovered during the program that Sam had highly sophisticated mathematical and analytical skills. Additionally, Sam was able to demonstrate hyper focus on tasks, innovative thinking, great collaborative skills and exceptional problem-solving abilities. Sam was offered employment at the conclusion of the program with PwC as a Cyber Security Analyst and continues to thrive in his role. Sam would not have had the opportunity to showcase his talents and obtain sustainable employment with an employer like PwC through his DES provider and was very grateful to have had the opportunity to participate in the Specialisterne Talent Program."

STATE AND TERRITORY INITIATIVES

In addition to DES, all states and territories are delivering a range of disability employment related initiatives and responses driven by their state disability strategies and plans. As with the services and programs previously outlined there is very limited commitment or investment to support employment initiatives specific to autistic jobseekers.

*Data source NDIS participant data
31, Dec 2019 <https://data.ndis.gov.au/explore-data/participant-data>

**Name changed for privacy

MAINSTREAM, BUSINESS AND SOCIETAL RESPONSIBILITY

GOVERNMENTS AND BUSINESSES – SHIFTING THE DIAL ON AUTISM

"He [Thorkil Sonne, Specialisterne Founder] lit in me a passion to change the status quo within IBM to not only promote diversity, which we have always championed within IBM, but to drive neurodiversity engagement across the whole of IBM globally.

So why would businesses like IBM engage neuro-diverse talent? Firstly, I found the unemployment rate among neurodiverse twenty-something people was around 40-50%, so there was a social responsibility out there, but I also found the reason for creating a neurodivergent hiring program was far more tangible and multi-layered. The impact was there on your team, the individual employed, the family, the CEO of your next client, your own boss – all positive impacts. I couldn't find a single reason why I should not pursue this and make it real.

When I started connecting with local centres in IBM, I also discovered a strong connection between hiring neurodiverse employees and strong retention outcomes which is always a challenge for delivery centres."
IBM

Andrew Williams, Global Neurodiversity Lead, IBM

SYSTEM CHANGE – DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Governments and businesses have been highly proactive and deliberate over the last few years to drive diversity and inclusion (D&I) throughout workplaces. Across governments and industries, there has been greater investment for D&I initiatives to increase diversity across the workforce.

Here in Australia we have seen a large shift in targeted diversity programs prioritised around certain cohorts with a strong focus towards building opportunities, cultural acceptance and inclusive workplaces for Gender, LGBTQI+, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and People with Disabilities (PwDs) more generally.

The Commonwealth Government, as well as each state and territory government, have all set their own targets, quotas and time frames to increase the number of PwDs employed into public service.

While the increased investment and commitment for D&I initiatives within businesses and government is commendable, we note a continued lack of acknowledgement to the issue. In particular, the need for a specific system-based response for autism as a cohort in our population that is experiencing far higher levels of unemployment than any other disability type, with rates similar to the most marginalised groups in our society. With no targeted or mandated response here in Australia to prioritise employment pathways for autistic people, and with an increasing prevalence of autism in our population, the outlook and impact is potentially very bleak.

While Specialisterne's primary objective is about equity, inclusion and the rights of autistic people to seek, gain and pursue meaningful careers in the open labour market, there is also a sound business and economic argument for governments and businesses in relation to building their capacity and culture to engage autistic employees into their workforce. Autistic individuals can offer a different range of highly employable skills, thinking styles, traits and abilities from their neurotypical colleagues. Many businesses are starting to see autistic jobseekers as an untapped talent pool.

"Employees on the autism spectrum were as much as 140 percent more productive than their peers."

James Mahoney, Global Head of Autism at Work, JPMorgan Chase

Here in Australia we are starting to see some growing interest, commitment and engagement from both Government and business sectors to trial and expand their diversity activities to engage autistic talent. This includes a small number of pilot autism talent programs across Federal Government Public Service Agencies and some state based Public Service organisations. Most of the businesses who are now exploring and investing in autistic and neurodiverse recruitment are not only pursuing these programs as a part of their diversity strategy but are targeting autistic talent as they can see the value of the skills that autistic employees can bring and the competitive advantage they can offer.

"My favourite part is feeling like a useful asset to the ABS, and putting my acquired analysis talents to good use."

Autistic employee, ABS Canberra

Three compelling themes that drive a case for autism hiring programs in businesses:

- **Diversity and inclusion – Workforce strategy, a business goal to provide a more diverse and inclusive environment across their business.**
- **Retention or churn issues – The business experiences retention issues and has high levels of churn in certain roles or areas of their business activity.**
- **Technical or particular skill shortage – The business is seeking a very particular or difficult to find skill or ability within the context of a role in the business.**

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

SUMMARY

Specialisterne has been working globally for more than 12 years to change business and societal attitudes about autism and increase autistic people's employment opportunities. We have five years of experience here in Australia as a "specialist" Autism at Work Social Impact Enterprise. We have a team with over 80 years of combined industry, clinical, educational and specialist expertise in autism, recruitment and culture change. We believe our experience, knowledge and understanding of autism at work qualifies us to provide recommendations and suggestions to the Select Committee on Autism. This includes advice on how the current rate of unemployment and the experiences that autistic people face in job seeking and the workplace can be improved to "level the playing field" while enabling greater opportunities for autistic people to pursue a valued and meaningful career or occupation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Current Employment and Support Systems

SHORT TERM

- Every DES/SLES provider that offers service and support to autistic students/ jobseekers should undertake adequate 'autism at work' training and enablement;
- Where DES providers have limited skill and expertise, utilise program funds to engage organisations that have expertise in working with autistic jobseekers to identify skills and find and maintain meaningful employment;
- DES/SLES providers utilise program funds to engage autism employment specialists to:
 - facilitate autism assessment and talent programs; and
 - assess and identify the employable skills and strengths of their autistic DES/SLES participants.
- DES providers utilise the expertise of autism employment specialists to provide foundational education and 'autism at work' training for businesses into which autistic DES participants are employed.

MEDIUM TERM

- Establish a minimum relevant qualification and experience requirement for staff working alongside participants in DES/SLES programs e.g. Allied Health – (OT, Speech, Psychology, Social Work), HR and Recruitment, Career Counselling, Coaching or Community Health/Development qualification;
- DES/SLES providers required to select, register and verify their areas of expertise to allow jobseekers to better identify a DES/SLES with knowledge of their disability;
- DES/SLES providers to utilise their funding to engage external specialist expertise;
- COAG and/or state and territories to allocate funds or establish a targeted school leaver employment support pathway specific to autism for autistic individuals who are not eligible for SLES or NDIS funded supports;
- Operational performance measurements of DES should be reviewed to acknowledge and capture the qualitative and individual outcomes of jobseekers rather than the quantitative number and date-based measures that are currently being used;
- Greater investment and funding subsidy options to be made available to mainstream labour hire and recruitment firms to incentivise and increase their capacity, knowledge and responsibility to support autistic jobseekers to find, pursue and obtain meaningful employment.

LONG TERM

- Through increased investment and upskilling of mainstream recruitment and employment firms, reduce the number of autistic jobseekers who are referred to DES/SLES. Revise the DES system to be used as a 'Specialist' multidisciplinary support for autistic and other jobseekers. That is, to be used where a more intensive program of support and assistance is required (e.g. coaching and behavioural based therapy and intervention) to help individuals identify their skills and what they may need to be 'employment ready'.

System Change – The role of Governments and business

SHORT TERM

- COAG and state and territory governments set a target and mandate a quota of workforce % specific to autistic employees over the next five years;
- Both Federal and State and Territory governments commit to ongoing employment entry and pathway programs into public service similar to Graduate, ATSI, seniors and other specific pathway programs;
- Government to establish vendor/contract management obligations with their suppliers to increase the number of autistic people employed;
- Government to invest in more immediate funding or establish incentive-based initiatives to increase the number of businesses targeting autism in their workplace diversity and culture programs.

MEDIUM TERM

- Government to commit to further investment to build the capacity of:
 - open market recruitment and hiring firms; and
 - small to medium enterprises (SME's) to develop, support and assist autistic jobseekers to find and maintain meaningful employment.
- Governments to provide incentives or subsidies, such as internships or traineeship programs, within SME's to build business capacity to employ, engage and value the skills and abilities of autistic employees;
- More Australian businesses to engage in 'Autism at Work' awareness and business enablement and cultural training.

LONG TERM

- Government to drive and encourage larger businesses to invest in future autistic talent programs - particularly in the finance, tech and engineering sectors – by engaging directly with the education system to work with students in schools to help identify and nurture their strengths and skills, and to invest in future workforce talent from year six and beyond;
- Government to use policy to influence ASX businesses to build autism into their workforce diversity strategies. Government leading the way in their own best practice will be key to driving change in the business sector;
- Larger employer businesses to commit to and develop an autism pathway or program into employment;
- Larger employer organisations adopt their own autistic and neurodiverse hiring programs and cultural practices into their general business as usual (BAU);
- Focus on the longevity of employment of autistic people, not just the attainment of a job. This may need support for gathering data over time but also influence the objectives and measurement of the success of both employer and government initiatives;
- The National Autism Strategy should feature an all of life approach for autistic people. This can be done by focusing on key life stages where coordinated and targeted supports together with community and system responses, will enable people to navigate through each life stage. This will ensure individuals can navigate through each phase utilising supports as needed to ensure autistic people can pursue the same opportunities, aspirations and life goals as everyone else.

"While early childhood intervention is essential for autistic children, we need to be conscious that they are adults for far longer than they are children. It is important to remember that many autistic adults will continue to require targeted intervention across the course of their life transitions."

Autism Advocate

We acknowledge Julie Robertson, Jason White, Steph Carayannis, Polly Harding and Lou Dixon for their work in developing this submission paper. Specialisterne would also like to acknowledge and thank representatives from across the autism community who responded or contributed their thoughts and experiences to this paper.

We extend further acknowledgement and thanks to: David Smith – Employ for Ability; Darien Judge – ABS, Sam Micich – ClicksIT Recruitment; Jess Freer and Sandra Casinader – Westpac; Christian Hofmann – DHHS; Belinda Sheehan and Andrew Williams – IBM for their contribution and insights into this submission.

**Specialisterne has recently commenced 4 time limited Pilot programs funded by DSS and ILC in four locations nationally, focussed on building foundational practice knowledge and capacity of recruitment firms as well as a sample group of businesses including SME's to develop their skills in understanding the value of autistic employees, alternative methods of finding and identifying talents, recruiting and enabling neurodiverse inclusive workplace practices and cultures.*